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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PODGORICA 000231

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SUBJECT: ESTABLISHING A NATO OFFICE IN MONTENEGRO

REF: A) STATE 83586; B) PODGORICA 094

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Because the GOM's pro-NATO orientation has potential benefits for the wider region (including Serbia and Bosnia), it is in U.S. interest to encourage Montenegro to accelerate its vigorous push for closer ties with the Alliance. Yet, despite the GOM's strong pro-NATO orientation, Montenegro is the only NATO aspirant in the region (excluding invitee Croatia) with no NATO presence on the ground. We therefore strongly advocate the establishment of a small (3-person) NATO office in Podgorica that would provide both technical assistance and public outreach support. This is a low-cost, high-benefit initiative that would directly support an important USG policy priority in the Balkans. It could also be set up at a minimal cost, since the GoM has offered space and other support, and since the positions to staff the NATO presence could probably be easily shifted from other NATO offices in the region. See action request in Paragraph Eight. END SUMMARY.

Montenegro's Ambitious NATO Goals

12. (SBU) The GoM, which received an offer of Intensified Dialogue (ID) at Bucharest, is firmly committed to achieving NATO membership and pressing ahead with an ambitious integration timetable. It is in our strategic interest to assist Montenegro achieve its goals, as the drive toward NATO will solidify Montenegro's reform process, enhance regional security and cooperation, and provide a positive model for neighboring states. Recognizing this, Ref A outlined a set of priority goals, the achievement of which are critical to helping the GoM make a stronger case for advancement to the next stage in its relationship with NATO.

13. (SBU) Topping the priority list will be fulfilling the two dozen partnership goals identified in NATO's Planning and Review Process (PARP) and the several dozen more in the recently agreed upon Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP). Another key priority will be increasing public support for NATO membership, an uphill battle where a majority of citizens remain skeptical. There are good prospects for success, but achieving these goals will test the GoM's limited institutional and human capacity.

14. (SBU) Thus far, the GoM has a positive track record of defense and security reforms and has demonstrated the political will to succeed. This post already provides informal support, and we expect that other allies, in particular the new NATO Contact Point Embassy, will pitch in to help. But our small Embassy has its own capacity issues, and other NATO embassies are even smaller - some just an Ambassador and a deputy -- and lack the depth to offer significant assistance. There are a total of 3 NATO defense attaches in Montenegro.

15. (SBU) Therefore, we believe a NATO Contact Office in Podgorica, which the GoM officially requested in March, is a key missing piece that can provide critical and timely technical assistance. The office would not need to be large. Several (three or so) NATO staff based full-time in Montenegro could have an enormous positive impact and exponentially improve the GoM's ability to meet its NATO goals. Establishment of such an office would complement our bilateral efforts (ref A) to move Montenegro toward closer ties with the Alliance.

16. (SBU) We propose that a NATO Contact Office focus on the following key priorities (which track with our own priority goals outlined in Ref A):

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- helping the GoM fulfill its PARP and IPAP commitments;
- helping the GOM implement its security agreement with NATO;
- assisting the GoM with NATO documentation;
- aiding the GoM with its Communications Strategy to increase public support for NATO; and
- engaging the Montenegrin public on the benefits for Montenegro of membership;
- selecting and preparing Montenegrin personnel for participation in the ISAF;
- maintaining the ground lines of communication, established under the NATO Transit Agreement (in December 2007).

...At Minimal Cost

17. (SBU) The optimal solution would be for NATO to simply approve three new billets to establish an office in Podgorica, as this would be a relatively low-cost initiative that directly supports Alliance objectives here. We understand that NATO's budget is tight, however, and such a straightforward solution may be problematic. In this case, we believe that there is a way to establish such an Office in Podgorica at minimal cost in terms of both budget and staffing:

-- First, the GoM is strongly supportive of the establishment of such an Office and has assured us that it will provide space at no charge to NATO staff. We expect that the GOM would also be willing to consider other forms of support (translators and technical support).

-- Second, NATO could consider transferring a few positions from the four other NATO offices in the region. NATO would not have to close those offices, but merely to downsize them slightly to enable a small, new presence in Montenegro. Given the GOM's enthusiasm for NATO, the small NATO presence here should have an outsized influence and effect.

-- If NATO cannot come up with 3 new positions for Montenegro, one possible avenue would be for the Alliance to consider transferring a few positions from the 10-person Belgrade NATO Military Liaison Office, an office that we understand has been essentially moribund since its establishment almost two years ago. We understand that the Belgrade office hopes for greater engagement with the GOS in the near future following the signing of a security agreement with NATO. However, the Alliance should weigh whether signing of that agreement (an agreement that Montenegro has already concluded with NATO) warrants maintaining 10 or more billets in Serbia and zero in Montenegro, a country with a more favorable pro-NATO climate. This is particularly true given that the Belgrade office was originally established in December 2006 in part to support implementation of the July 2005 ground lines of communication (GLOC) agreement between NATO and the then-State Union -- i.e., an agreement that then covered both Montenegro and Serbia.

18. (SBU) Action Request: We request that the USG work with Allies in identifying the resources to establish a NATO Contact Office in Podgorica as quickly as possible.
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